

El Camino de las Misiones
extends from Ysleta through
Socorro to San Elizario
El Paso County
Texas

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HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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EL CAMINO DE LAS MISIONES

A HISTORY OF THE SPANISH MISSIONS AND PRESIDIO
IN THE EL PASO VALLEY

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INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEMS OF RESEARCH FOR THE VALLEY SETTLEMENTS

The first problem encountered in studying the history of the valley settlements on the Texas side of the Rio Grande is that of the international boundary which in 1848 made an artificial separation of the Valley's towns into two nations. Many legal records had to be recopied after the formation of El Paso County in 1850, and some certainly were never recopied at all. Thus, any research before the mid-nineteenth century must involve confusing and incomplete records in various Mexican collections. In examining land ownership for example, the Texan system of granting new title (in effect) each time a sale is made, may leave one at an impasse, unable to document a chain of title before 1960. With the separation of the Valley into two nations, much land was effectively seized from previous owners living on the Mexican, or right bank of the Rio Grande, and regranted to "American" owners.

For a purely historical narrative of the more general nature, the problems are less severe, but nonetheless troublesome. The early history of the Valley has been dealt with in great detail, with varying reliability. This period is the most easily documented as it is unquestionably Spanish colonial history and documents which must be examined. After the independence of Mexico from Spain, records become less clear. With the arrival of the American period by the mid-nineteenth century, the same confusion as above arises. With the influx of Americans into the Valley, attention on the part of American writers becomes focused almost entirely on the "Anglo" towns which became the city of El Paso in 1873. After this time, most mention of the missions and San Elizario seems to come from those who see them either as "quaint tourist attractions", full of "lazy Mexicans", or as containing the remnants of Indian tribes whose attraction is purely ethnological.

Of the sources listed in the bibliography which accompanies this report, the most reliable scholarship is in the works of Burrus, Gerald, Porter, Walz, and Anne Hughes. Even these can be problematic. Fr. Burrus relies very heavily on the unpublished work of Fr. Decorme, and although Fr. Decorme's reputation is as a serious, careful scholar, his lack of complete documentation makes corroboration of his research difficult, even for Fr. Burrus who is well acquainted with the source material available.

Anne Hughes' dissertation of 1913 is one of the great studies of the Valley. Her work does not, however, address the nineteenth century, and has flaws and gaps due to her incomplete knowledge of the sources available and their locations. This work was updated by Vina Walz in 1951, but even she does not address the nineteenth century, and this work, now thirty years old begins to be out of date as well.

Much remains to be studied of the American period (1848-present), research in which Dr. W.H. Timmons of the University of Texas at El Paso and others are involved. Many of Donniphan's men wrote accounts of their march, and many kept diaries. There

is as yet no complete analysis of the records they made of the Valley. Of the "forty-niners" who passed through the El Paso Valley on their way to the California gold fields, more will probably emerge as their diaries and letters are studied. More importantly, the myths and careless scholarship which have permitted gross inaccuracies to become carved into state markers or cast in plaques attached to the walls of historic buildings must be recognized as such when examining the development and history of the "mission trail".

I. 1528 TO 1680

Attention was first brought to bear on the area now known as New Mexico and Arizona early in the sixteenth century. Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca, treasurer for an expedition of Florida in 1528, was one of four men who survived a shipwreck and wandered across Texas and possibly part of New Mexico until, in April 1536, he and his companions arrived at a Spanish outpost on the coast of Lower California. While no one knows what precise route they took, their story aroused tremendous interest in the region, with tales of the "wonderful cities". In the following decades, Spanish occupation of Mexico moved northward from the original southern provinces to southern Chihuahua. This expansion culminated in 1562 with the establishment of the province of Nueva Vizcaya (New Biscay) a huge tract of land, largely unexplored, which included the present Mexican states of Chihuahua, Durango, Sonora, Sinaloa, Coahuila as well as parts of several others. Durango, known for its rich mines, was made the capital of this province.

Among those who was inspired by Cabeza de Vaca's story was a Franciscan, Fray Augustin Rodriguez, who in 1581, with a small party of Indian servants and a few other friars, escorted by a few soldiers under Francisco Sanchez Chamuscado, travelled through the area of modern El Paso on their way to New Mexico. The soldiers left the friars behind in the lands of the Tiguas and returned to San Bartolome. The friars were never heard from again, and a rescue mission the following year discovered they had been murdered. This expedition visited seventy-four pueblos and returned with more fantastic stories of great wealth and large populations.

Finally in 1598, the Spanish were able to finish what Cabeza de Vaca's story had started: the exploration and colonization of New Mexico. Don Juan de Onate, a wealthy man from Zacatecas, was commissioned to take an "army" of 130 "soldier-colonists" and their families, with a number of Franciscan friars, into the North. Instead of following the usual route down the length of the Rio Conchos, Onate took a shorter route, leaving the Conchos and travelling straight north across the desert. Having left Zacatecas in January 1598, he arrived at the Rio Grande (Rio Bravo, Rio del Norte) on April 20, and ten days later, farther upstream (near modern San Elizario) he took formal possession, in the name of King Philip II, of all the lands to the north and east of the river. On May 4, he crossed the river still farther upstream and named the place El Passo del Rio del Norte.

Onate and his successors subdued and colonized New Mexico, but left no permanent base at the Pass. Finally in 1659, after his successful mission to the Indians at Senecu, New Mexico, Fray Garcia de San Francisco y Zuniga persuaded the authorities to allow him to establish a mission for the Manso Indians who lived near the Pass. The mission church was begun in 1662 and completed in 1668. Dedicated to Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe del Paso del Norte y de los Mansos, it has been restored and still serves today.

Soon after he founded the mission of Guadalupe, Father Zuniga founded another mission Senecu del Sur, a few miles downstream. The date of foundation and its purpose are still unclear, but it seems to have been created c. 1665 to serve either Piro Indians or other Mansos. It was established before 1680. Other missions along this portion of the river, San Francisco de los Sumas and La Soledad, twelve and seventy leagues from Guadalupe respectively were also established before 1680.

El Paso del Norte was an important point on the trail which led from Santa Fe and the New Mexican settlements to Chihuahua and Mexico City. Supply trains, scheduled regularly every three years came through El Paso before crossing the desert to Chihuahua, and this valley provided a resting place for many travellers along the Camino Real (The King's Highway).

II. 1680 TO 1693

During the Governorship of Don Antonio Otermin, on August 10, 1680 the pueblo tribes of New Mexico, led by a Tewa named Pope, revolted against the rule of the Spanish. As the plot was discovered, the revolt took place one day earlier than planned, and the Spaniards and Christian Indians in all the pueblos were attacked simultaneously on the feast of San Lorenzo. The rebels murdered an unknown number of Indians and between four hundred and one thousand Spaniards.

Governor Otermin in Santa Fe and Alonso Garcia at the presidio in Isleta managed to rally the survivors and make their way south to El Paso where they arrived on October 9, 1680. Otermin brought with him Tigua, Piro and Tompiro Indians as well as many Spaniards. The influx of nearly two thousand refugees in the previously small settlement of El Paso del Norte makes it most logical to accept the version given by Burrus that the new arrivals were immediately dispersed into new settlements down the river.

Some Spaniards and Piros were settled at Senecu del Sur; Spanish families at Santisimo Sacramento, and Tiguas at San Antonio de la Ysleta del Sur were established farther downstream with a common church. Farther downstream from these were Spaniards at San Pedro de Alcantara and Piros at Santa Maria de Socorro del Sur. Lastly, Otermin founded San Lorenzo (El Real de San Lorenzo, or "El Realito"), which was named for the day of the rebellion in New Mexico and populated with Spanish families. This became Otermin's headquarters and the temporary seat of the government of New Mexico. While the precise site of San Lorenzo is not known, it was in the same area as the later Hacienda de los Tiburcios which eventually became San Elizario. The Indian settlements bore the same names as the pueblos in New Mexico from which the refugees had come.

The following November (1681), Otermin led an unsuccessful attempt to reconquer New Mexico, but was forced to return in February 1682 bringing with him more Christian Tiguas and Piros whom he settled with their relatives in Ysleta and Socorro. At this time, Otermin petitioned the Spanish authorities for a presidio at San Lorenzo, and permission was granted in August 1683. The new presidio was named Nuestra Senora del Pilar y el Glorioso San Jose and was established between San Lorenzo and El Paso. Later, this presidio was moved to El Paso as the originally wide spread valley settlements were moved closer together for greater protection. Socorro was moved to its present site in 1683, apparently after a plot to kill the padre. At this time the first permanent church of Socorro was built and dedicated

to Nuestra Senora de la Limpia Concepcion de los Piro de Socorro del Sur, and was probably modelled on nearby Senecu,

In 1684, the Mansos and their allies revolted and left their church to return to their own traditions. From this time on there were increasing complaints of unrest, but the valley settlements were not abandoned due to their strategic position. In 1692, the Governor, Diego Vargas, made grants of the lands and churches in the Valley to the Franciscans, namely:

Plaza de Armas de El Paso del Norte
Real de San Lorenzo
San Antonia de Senecu
Corpus Christi de la Ysleta de los Tiguas
Nuestra Senora de la Limpia Concepcion de los Piro de Socorro

Before undertaking his famed "bloodless" reconquest of New Mexico, Governor Vargas took a census of the valley in December-January 1692-3. Of approximately 1600 persons living in the valley in five settlements, the 1000 Spaniards and 600 Indians were all reported as living very badly. When in October-December 1693, Governor Vargas retook control of the New Mexican province, he brought with him some 500 families, mostly from the Valley. This depletion of the newer settlements and the reconquest of New Mexico closed another period for the El Paso area.

III. 1693 TO 1780

Vargas' return to New Mexico left the missions near the Pass quite depopulated, although most of those who had gone back to New Mexico seem to have been Spaniards. Socorro for example, was left with only fifteen Spanish families.

In the early eighteenth century, flooding destroyed the second permanent church at Ysleta. A new church was begun at Socorro in 1725, and in 1731, the Bishop of Durango, visiting the area decided that the Mansos were not being properly served and sent one of his diocesan priests to establish a mission for them to the north-east of Socorro. This mission, called Santa Maria (or Nuestra Senora) de las Caldas was not successful and was removed to San Lorenzo in 1749.

Fray Juan Miguel Menchero visited the area in 1744, and his report and map described the missions of that time. At Socorro, the new church had been completed with bells and sacred vessels donated by the king of Spain, but the town was inhabited by only six Spanish families and sixty Piro families. The church at Ysleta had also been completed at this time. Menchero's map also shows the settlement of Tiburcios, near the present location of San Elizario.

Throughout this period, the Indians at the missions began to become assimilated into the Spanish-Mexican population. Socorro for example still had sixty Indian families in 1744, but by 1750 there were only forty-three all of whom were said to understand Spanish.

From 1766-1768, the Marques de Rubi, on a commission from King Charles III of Spain, and accompanied by Nicholas LaFora, a Captain of the Royal Engineers, toured the northern provinces to inspect, reorganize and update the presidial system of defenses. LaFora's map and diary survive and clearly show the six settlements to the south of

the river, As a result of this tour, and Rubi's recommendations, the "Reglamento" for the reorganization of the presidio system was put out in 1772.

Under the guidance of Hugo Oconor or Hugo O'Connor, the presidios were reorganized into a line of defence, evenly spaced over the distance of six hundred leagues. By the addition of six new presidios to the existing fifteen, the presidios could be placed approximately every forty leagues. The "Reglamento" also states that the presidio at El Paso del Norte should be moved to Carrizal, over which it had had jurisdiction and where it had maintained a skeleton force. The theory was that the nearly 5,000 residents in the valley were capable of defending themselves.

Another fort, established at Quajoquilla in 1752 was ordered to move to the "Valle de San Elceario". This is clearly not the same place as modern San Elizario as one glance at La Flora's map will show. This presidio, was ordered in 1780 to move from the "Valle de San Elceario" to the site of the Hacienda de los Tiburcios, about forty miles upriver, to protect that area, still vital for its trade routes. When this move took place, the El Paso Valley settlement at San Elizario was created by the transfer of the name of San Elceario with the presidio.

IV. 1780 TO 1848

Little appears to have stimulated interest in the Valley after the establishment of the new presidio de San Elceario at the former Hacienda de los Tiburcios in 1780, until the Mexican War of Independence in 1814 removed the Spanish soldiers from the area to fight in the south. Life appears to have continued undisturbed in this region, with the remaining residents of San Elizario continuing to use the presidio chapel. After Mexico won her freedom from Spain in 1821, the El Paso Valley settlements became caught in a tug of war between Chihuahua and Durango, a fight which ended in something of a draw when Chihuahua was given legal claim to this territory by the Mexican Constitution of 1824, but Durango's Bishops retained ecclesiastical jurisdiction.

Major flooding of the Rio Grande in 1829, caused tremendous destruction of property in the Valley, and was probably the flood which was responsible for carving the new bed of the river to the south of the Ysleta, Socorro and San Elizario. The churches at Socorro, San Elizario and Senecu were all destroyed by the flood, and many of the surrounding buildings must also have been lost. Throughout this period, the towns would be referred to as being on an island, or "La Isla", lying between the two beds of the river. Another large flood occurred in 1840, and while there seems to be little or no mention of the damage incurred, the church at San Elizario was rebuilt at this time and it was not until 1843 that the present church at Socorro was begun. All maps of the region after 1840 show the new channel and the old forming an oval on which were located the three towns. In 1850, the settlement of San Jose de los Ranchos was founded to the north of Ysleta (the present church there dates from c. 1900).

All the early reports speak in glowing terms of the rich agriculture of the region. The wines and brandies produced here are spoken of as being the best in Mexico, and as good as the best Spanish wines. John T. Hughes wrote to the United States War Department in 1847, suggesting that it "would be a charity to rid these people of their present governors, and throw around them the shield of American protection."

His motives were a bit obvious when referring to an annual production of 200,000 gallons of wine in the Valley he continued to point out that "pears, peaches, apples, quinces and figs are produced here in the greatest profusion. If this valley were cultivated by an energetic American population it would yield perhaps ten times the quantity of wine and fruits at present produced."

By the time Hughes was writing, the beginning of the present canal system (the "acequias") was already well established. In the 1830's the river was dammed and the first canals were dug. The land was divided into the haciendas and ranchos owned by the wealthy families, and into "ejidos", lands which were owned communally by village residents on both banks of the river. Large salt deposits to the north were used freely by all valley residents, and the endless supply of salt from these beds also supplied salt for Chihuahua. This tradition of salt collection would be the cause of the Salt War of 1877.

The major threat to the well-being of the residents came from the Apache raids, which still continued into the 1830's and from Comanche raids beginning in the 1840's. These Indians were primarily interested in taking livestock, and are said to have sawed out portions of walls with rawhide. An explanation which has been frequently given for pieces of glass found embedded in some walls is that they prevented this type of theft. And in 1850, when Americans were stationed at San Elizario, the officer in charge reported that the chief concern of the inhabitants was to have protection from these raids.

Texas' independence from Mexico in 1836 had no immediate impact on this valley which was considered part of New Mexico, but Texas laid claim to the area and tried to take it from the Mexicans in 1841 with an unsuccessful campaign on Santa Fe. Not until 1846, when Colonel Alexandre Doniphan's Missouri Volunteers fought the Battle of Brazito on the outskirts of El Paso and that city surrendered on December 27, 1846, did American domination of the Valley become a possibility. Doniphan and his men stayed in El Paso until February 1847, and many first hand accounts of their stay have survived. Besides their reports of the agricultural resources of the Valley, many commented on the semi-ruinous state of the Presidio de San Elceario and its church.

Prior to the War with Mexico and the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) there were relatively few Americans, mostly traders, living in the El Paso area. Many of these had married Mexicans and adopted Mexican citizenship. The river had always united the six settlements, but following the treaty in 1848 the southern channel of the river was judged to be the deepest, thus putting the three towns on "the Island" in Texas, not Chihuahua. The Rio Grande had become an international boundary, separating not connecting the villages in the Valley.

V. 1848 TO 1955

The period following the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo saw the occupation of the Valley by an ever increasing number of Americans, the growth of the small American towns on the north bank of the Rio Grande, their incorporation as the city of El Paso, Texas and the gradual decline of the older mission towns and San Elizario.

This process was very gradual as can be noted in the changes of jurisdiction over the missions. When the Valley became Texan, the Bishop of Texas had given control of them (officially) to Bishop Lamy of Santa Fe. However, when the Franciscans left the valley in 1852, it was to the Bishop of Durango, Zubria, to whom the actual control passed. Not until ten years after Zubria's death (1863), on May 23, 1873, did the Valley's churches come under American ecclesiastical jurisdiction, when Zubria's successor allowed them to pass to Bishop Salpointe of Tucson. In 1892, responsibility for these churches was moved again, this time from Tucson to Dallas, where they remained until the more recent establishment of the diocese of El Paso.

During this time, a number of physical changes occurred to the churches in the Valley. In 1854, under the direction of Father Borrajo, the pastor of Ysleta, Socorro and San Elizario, a new chapel was begun at San Elizario. In 1850, the Americans had suggested tearing down the old one (or rather its ruins) and rebuilding it with adobes from the old presidio. The history of this new chapel is unknown, but it is presumably that which is pictured in a sketch found by Dr. W.H. Timmons in the archives of the University of Texas at Austin. In 1873, the transept was added to the church at Socorro, and in 1877 the present church at San Elizario was begun. In 1907, the church at Ysleta was nearly destroyed by fire. It was rebuilt the following year, but only a small portion of the walls of this latest remodelling can be considered as dating from the eighteenth century.

In 1850, El Paso County was formed, and American troops aided in the transition of the Valley and its residents from Mexico to the United States. Such opposition as there was to the transfer had been dealt with by this time and later ethnic disturbances of the "Salt War" variety had their origins in mutual misunderstanding of traditions. San Elizario was made the county seat with the largest population in the valley besides El Paso del Norte (Juarez), and retained that position until a disputed election moved it to Ysleta in 1873. Ysleta was the county seat from 1873 until 1883 when another disputed election moved to El Paso, which had been incorporated as a city in 1873. In 1884, El Paso del Norte was renamed Ciudad Juarez in honor of the Mexican patriot, Benito Juarez, and El Paso as a Mexican city ceased to exist.

Throughout this period, Ysleta and the American communities on the left bank, continued to grow, while the valley towns were unable to keep up. In 1880, Ysleta accounted for 1,500 of the county's 3,800 residents, of whom only 400 were of "Anglo" heritage. This number had increased to 12,000 "Anglos" by 1900, most of whom were concentrated in El Paso.

Beginning in 1881, with the arrival of the railroads, the transportation systems of the valley saw great changes. The railroad passed through El Paso and Ysleta, but ignored Socorro, and had a "depot" for San Elizario several miles from that town, from which the town of Clint later developed. Clint's prosperity and that of Ysleta and El Paso accelerated the decline of San Elizario in importance, despite the county road which opened in 1884 to connect El Paso and the mission towns. From 1913 to 1925, an interurban railroad went from Ysleta to El Paso, and after 1925, when the railroad had ceded the land to the county for a road, the route was continued with busses.

By far the greatest change in the Lower Valley over the last 130 years has been in its agriculture. As early as 1884, drought affected the area with a changing water table, and dropping river flow. After the construction of the Elephant Butte Dam in 1916, which assured water for irrigation, rising salinity and seepage gradually killed off the orchards and much farming activity. Many of the Mexican owners abandoned their farms, and orchards were replaced with cotton fields, the particular variety of cotton grown here being highly salt resistant. By 1920, cotton was grown on most of the 4,214 acres of land under cultivation in the Valley. Today expansion of cotton fields poses a serious threat to many of the historic resources of the region.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the Indians in the El Paso Valley continued to lose their cultural autonomy, becoming gradually assimilated into the culture of the Spanish-Mexican residents of this region. Many took Spanish names, and by the twentieth century were all but assimilated.

In 1901, the American ethnologist J. Walter Fewkes, reporting to the Archeological Institute of American on his visit to the pueblos in the El Paso area, found only a handful of Tiguas able to speak their own language, Piros who spoke only Spanish, and Indian customs which had lost all their original religious significance. He described Ysleta as:

an instructive example of a Pueblo Indian settlement which has become a Mexican town...The open space before the church is surrounded by a low adobe wall. This enclosure in which stands a cross is called the cemetery and was formerly a burial place, ...but is no longer used for that purpose... the site of the old pueblo adjoins this cemetery, from which it is now separated by a street [Old Pueblo Road]... formerly Indian houses were arranged on that site in rectangular form about a plaza, each building being a small one-story habitation made of upright logs chinked and plastered in adobe, forming a type of building called by the Mexicans "jacal".

While the bulk of Fewkes' paper deal with the customs of the Tiguas at Ysleta, he briefly mentions Socorro, Senecu and San Lorenzo, but describes their residents as "thoroughly Mexicanized".

By 1940, with the outbreak of the Second World War, the "Americanization" of the El Paso Valley can be said to have been irrevocably set in place. The towns of Ysleta, Socorro and San Elizario had lost their stature, remaining only as tourist attractions subsidiary to the large city of El Paso whose continuing expansion was beginning to pose a threat. Drought and rising salinity had killed off the prosperous orchards and vineyards of previous centuries. By 1945, in neighboring Huds-peth County (created from El Paso County in 1873), two-thirds of the land previously under cultivation had been retired. The annexation by the city of El Paso of all of Ysleta in 1955, placed the boundary of the city within sight of Socorro church and brought an end to the independence of the three Mexican "mission" towns which were once on "La Isla".

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